DISCOURSES AROUND THE KASHMIRI PANDITS:

ENGAGING WITH THE 'FRACTURED IDENTITY' AND THE 'POLITICS OF DEADLOCK'

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Title of the Dissertation: **Discourses around the Kashmiri Pandits: Engaging with the 'Fractured Identify' and the 'Politics of Deadlock'**

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The Kashmiri Pandit community has largely been discursively presented and scholarly engaged with as a cohesive, single caste community with strong territorial and cultural roots in Kashmir Valley, with little discussion around the possibility of differentiated identities and multiplicity of experiences that might be present within the community. Against such an undivided background, their conflict induced mass migration from the Valley in 1990's is seen as a major disruptive event that assumingly changes everything within and around the Pandit discourse, dividing it into two separate eras of pre and post migration.

This research moves beyond the separation and homogenization to explore a contextualized idea of the Kashmiri Pandit identity. In this process, the research locates the articulation of Pandit identity in historically embedded socio-political contexts to understand how it was traditionally produced through the societal position the community held and how this position has sustained (or not) over time through interactions with other co-regionalist and co-religionist communities within and beyond the Valley. Through a multi-sited ethnographic study, varied experiences of migration, non-migration and return, have been brought forth. The findings of the study have been summarized around two inductively generated themes – 'fractured identity' and 'politics of deadlock'.

The first theme elaborates on the dialectic exchanges between varied categories of Kashmiri Pandits. These experientially varied (also internally stratified) categories like migrants, non-migrants and pre 1990 settlers, are not presented as ontologically separate groups or competing identities but as analytical categories or multiple subjectivities to highlight a layered and relational construction of Kashmiri Pandit identity. However, a separation is often discursively manufactured through selective essentialization of the Pandit identity around territoriality, religious distinctiveness and competitive victimhood by each group to claim

'authenticity' vis à vis the other(s), presented as culturally deviant and inauthentic.

The essentialization also influences the idea of return (of the migrants), that I argue is pilgrimized around a sanitized homeland, created as an ideal one, devoid any socio-political cleavages. Anything that falls short of the ideal return is dismissed. The idealization feeds into a politics of deadlock around an idea of return (distinguished from the physical act of return) that may be practically impossible yet rhetorically pursued.

I highlight the influence of an overarching discourse and the role of the community organization on an individual community member. This becomes even more pronounced among migrant communities who arguably lack geographical confinement and may seek concretion of their identity through a vehement discourse. However, I do not treat the individual Pandit as a passive consumer of the discourse but as an agentic actor who retains the power to influence, manufacture and derive opportunities (and protection) from it, even in a position of supposed precarity.

The study is based on a multi-sited ethnography conducted in three cities i.e. Kashmir Valley, Jammu city, Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR) over a period of ten months. Not restricted to the migrant section of the community in Delhi and Jammu, it also covers the lesser analyzed sections like that of the non-migrants, i.e., those who did not migrate from the Valley in 1990's, returnees or those who have chosen to return to the Valley and to some extent pre 1990 settlers or those who had migrated from the Valley before 1990. The motive is to bring forth the plausible diversity in the Pandit experiences with respect to processes like migration, non-migration, resettlement outside Kashmir Valley and return to the Valley, so as to broaden the debate beyond a narrow understanding guided by a security perspective. To contextualize the findings of the study detailed later in the following chapters, I will first begin with a detailed discussion tracing the evolving and changing socio-political dynamics the Pandit community was engaged in, within and beyond Kashmir Valley. This includes exploring the rhetorical positions and beliefs they subscribed to in terms of articulating their caste centric identity, the negotiation of this identity in daily exchanges with Kashmiri Muslims, the nature and degree of their interaction with co-religious communities beyond the Valley. Lastly, I also explore the process of mass migration from the Valley the community experienced around early 1990's owing to the growing political volatility in Kashmir, which arguably raised questions about their security and future in the Valley.

The assumed homogenization of the Kashmiri Pandit community and its discourse overwhelmingly dominates the hitherto published literature on the community. The present study problematizes this assumption to give way to the recognition of not just the existence of heterogeneous layers within the community, but also highlight the extent and nature of their interactions with one another. It identifies factions like migrants, non-migrants, pre-1990 settlers and the returnees broadly to counter shortsighted generalizations about the Pandits, that is clubbed as a migrant community without any critical engagement with what the labelling entails and who it may or may not apply to within the community. The study stresses that the community is indeed a heterogeneous one. This is reflected in the varied socio-economic backgrounds that the respondents of the study belonged to, the subcaste categories within the community that they ascribe to and the way they engage in identity politics often in opposition to other factions within the community. The interaction of the factions within the Pandit community is marked by simultaneous processes of unifying under a strong Pandit identity and competing against each other to establish their authentic character and relative victimhood.

The two larger themes of politics of deadlock and fractured identity shape the findings of the dissertation. The focus is on the dialectic between the discourse and its power to manipulate or influence the individual Kashmiri Pandit and the power of the latter to selectively associate and disassociate with it to influence the power relations and manufacture a sense of stability even in a position of claimed precarity and dislocation. The sub themes of each chapter connect to these two themes. Each chapter is based on a section of the community that may vary from the others based on their current geographical location, proximity to homeland and access to corridors of power. The purpose of the division is not to separate the groups as opposing factions, though they may at times engage in oppositional politics, but rather to highlight the multiplicity of experiences that can exist within a community. In view of the objective of the study, i.e., to deconstruct the assumed homogeneity around the community, identifying factions and differentiated experiences helps us understand the nature of the Kashmiri Pandit identity and move beyond an episodic understanding of their migration.

The first faction that I have dealt with is that of non-migrants. I use the sub theme of resistance identity to highlight their subjective politics. Not only do they differ from the migrants in the fact that they did not migrate, they also engage in a politics of dissociating with the migrant victimhood. However, it does not mean that the two groups are not connected at all. I highlight cases of family and organizational linkages between the two. They are often part of the same family or social circle wherein bonds are maintained even after migration. The

separation however is manufactured at a discursive level, as a willful act or a strategic tool to separate the non-migrant victimhood from that of the migrants. It is done mainly to counter the assumed threat of being eclipsed by the dominant migrant discourse that often underrecognizes the non-migrant existence or contribution. The non-migrant discourse based on territoriality is manufactured to resist the migrant discourse that is seen as politically powerful but culturally deviant. The discourse in rejecting the migrant position, essentializes the Kashmiri Pandit identity around territory.

The second faction studied is that of the Jammu based migrants under the sub-theme of non-binary differentiated agency. Here I try to deconstruct the discursive assumption that associates migrants with complete lack of agency. Migration is equated with tarnishing of agency of any kind. The findings of the study reveal, that even in positions of precarity, an actor, in this case a migrant, retains some form or degree of agency in dealing with dislocation. However, agency cannot be homogenized for all migrants. I draw a distinction between camp based and non-camp migrants and argue that even though both possess and exercise agency, their respective agencies differ from each other. While the non-camp migrant might have exhibited agency in integrating with the host city, the camp migrant who is seen as a community peripheral, also uses his position and at times dependence on the government as an agentic stance. The dependence on the state is used to forward an argument for the need to return that dominates the community discourse. The camp migrant retains his agency in being projected as the ideal migrant and a potential returnee. So, the discourse can be manipulated or influenced even from the periphery.

The third category is that of the Delhi based migrants. I use the sub theme of collective memory to highlight the role of community organizations play in consolidating a sense of identity in a migrant population that lives a busy and much more integrated life in their host city, compared to the migrants in Jammu or non-migrants in Kashmir. The community organizations at time become the mouthpiece of the community that now associates with its cultural identity only symbolically. Again, I do not homogenize this for the entire migrant population based in Delhi. Cases of generational difference in experiences are highlighted to give a layered account to resettlement. However, collective memory plays a central role in informing the identity construction especially of those with limited connection and experience of living in the homeland. In common finding with many studies on diasporic and migrant communities, the identity of the Kashmiri Pandit is woven around the homeland. In fact, given the assumptions of loss of identity and the fears of cultural extinction in the future, reliance on

collective memory becomes even stronger and so does the power of the elite or community organizations in manufacturing the collective identity of the group.

The last sub category is that of a relatively small group of returnees. I use the theme of pilgrimization of return to highlight the incongruence of the constructed idea of return and the actual experiences of those who have returned. Categorizing them into two sets of self-facilitated and government-assisted return, I highlight the use of coping strategies employed by the two groups in the process of reacculturation or re-familiarizing themselves with the culture they either already knew or had an idea of. The process of return migration has been one of adjustment for most. The idea of return on the one hand I argue, is based on the pilgrimization of the return to a homeland constructed in ideal terms. The actual act of returning on the other hand and the process of resettlement are often very far from this discursively constructed ideal.

Going back to the objectives of the study, a gap that the findings of the study try to address is the disconnect between the pre- and post-1990 discourses. Taking a rather ahistoric viewpoint, the two are seen a separate. However, the study reveals that the present disposition of the individual members of the community and that of the community as a whole are fairly influenced by their historic placement in the social fabric both within and outside the Kashmir Valley. I identify and differentiate two factors about the 1990 migration. Some can be called immediate factors that led to people either choosing to migrate or stay and the other factors concern the prolonged social and economic processes that could have played a part as well. To begin with, the findings of the study suggest that the decision to migrate or not was highly influenced by immediate factors, mainly the security threat either perceived or experienced, adding to 'atmosphere of fear' that resulted in mass migration of the community. However here too, not everyone was equally or similarly affected by such factors. Apart from the fear that most Pandits claim to have experienced in varying degrees, the socio-economic background of each family, their contacts and pre-established ties or networks outside the Valley, places to relocate to either temporarily or permanently, knowledge or exposure of what life would be like outside the Valley, etc., were equally important for individual decision making.

These observations further bring forth two important findings. Firstly, the pre migration circumstances of individual households dictated their decision making during the 1990 migration apart from a general environment of fear. Secondly, migration was not an isolated episode but a graded process. As opposed to the general perception prevalent in the media, migration was a long-drawn-out process. For some, the relocation was undertaken as a

temporary measure to escape the tension in the Valley. This is reflected in the fact that many families first sent their daughters outside the Valley as a temporary measure. The timeline reflected in the accounts collected during the study also reveal that migration was spread out, with a bulk of it concentrated from late 1989 to the summer of 1990. Migration was also circular for many who migrated for a few months but returned dissatisfied with the living conditions in Jammu camps. Apart from the immediate factors, a prolonged sense of being a minority had crept into the community well before 1990 starting with the political mobilization of Kashmiri Muslims in 1930. This also played a role in influencing migration. It can be argued that it was the changing nature of the societal relations within the Valley that compounded a growing sense of insecurity among the members of the Pandit community.

Migration is also not limited to the early displacement of the Pandit community from the Valley. As the narratives collected from respondents in Delhi and Jammu reflect, it is a multilayered process that is still unfolding for many. Most importantly, I noticed that there is a generational angle to it. For the elder generation, migration mainly refers to the feeling of being dislocated from a home they had spent most of their lives in. This uprooting, by the older respondents was equated with 'loss of everything familiar', be it food, language, topography, daily activities to spend time, the pattern of houses they lived in, the temperatures they were used to and most importantly the kinship ties they had earned in their lifetime. For the middle-aged respondents, migration was mostly about the struggles of settling down afresh in an unfamiliar and challenging environment. The younger generation sees migration mostly as cultural dilution. For many the only source of information about the cultural knowhows of the community are the older generations who pass down oral accounts of how life was before migration. Apart from generational difference, people who faced multiple displacements, first to Jammu and then to bigger cities like Delhi, migration has been a continuous reality. Apart from helping us move beyond an episodic understanding of the Pandit migration, it also highlights the role of positional inequalities, socioeconomic or generational within the Pandit community which intern deconstruct the assumed homogeneity further.

A similar trend is also noticed in processes of resettlement and return which are simultaneous processes that run parallel to migration. Socio-economic and generational factors have largely dictated which city an individual migrant has settled in, for how long and in what circumstances. It is evident in the analytical distinction I draw between the camp and the non-camp migrants. Further, I try to contextualize the 'process of return' by delinking it from the 'idea of return'. While the former is based on the process of reacculturation that is a practical

journey returnees have to undertake upon returning to the Valley, the idea of return is often based on a rhetorical idealization done mostly from afar. The study also distinguishes between individual return and community return. Though often muddled together and used interchangeably, the study highlights that community return is mostly treated as a moral necessity by most respondents, but it does not automatically translate into individual return. Most respondents evaluate the practical sense returning to the Valley would make for them. It is therefore a choice that they demand. Another significant finding that I would like to highlight is that return, as opposed to its idealistic construction is not a phenomenon in the offing. It is a reality of the present. To an extent, it has already begun to unfold. The returnees who have been resettled by the government or those who have returned on their own are testimonies that 'return' is in operation. However, a large section of the community disregards such returns. They are compared with the idea of a return that is constructed rhetorically. The practical and graded return of some does not satisfy the inflated conceptualization and the optics of an ideal return.

The patterns of incongruence between the rhetoric and praxis in the Kashmiri Pandit discourse, especially when it comes to the idea of return to the homeland has been engaged with through the concept of 'politics of deadlock'. In simple terms, through the idea of deadlock, I want to understand the nature of delay in the homecoming of Kashmir Pandits and the simultaneous factors that encourage their prolonged stay outside. While I detail that there are individual considerations like feasibility to relocate for every respondent, there is also a discursive dimension to it. This demands a critical look at the nature of interaction and involvement the Pandit community exhibits with its homeland. I stress on the limited contact with the motherland that most respondents reported during the study and the simulations dependence of such people on the community organizations and political ideologies beyond the community to reestablish or maintain any link to with Kashmir. Theoretically, I build on Abeles' (2010) idea of politics as a consensus building activity that aims at mutual existence of competing interests and the survival of the society at large. An assumption here is that members of the society have some benefit in mutual co-existence. Arguably, migration has altered this shared interest most respondents from the Pandit community have with those who continue to live in the Valley. Compounded with the lack of direct contact on a daily basis, it fuels a tendency of symbolic posturing. In case of return it is articulated in the form of demands of a grand return that has a symbolic resonance rather than practical viability. The simultaneous pursuance of both, I argue have been significant contributors to the current state of deadlock.

It is interesting that the deadlock is pursued at a discursive level and may even continue after the practical return of the community members in whatever form as seen in the case of returnee employees.

A parallel theme central to the present study is that of fractured identity. In contrast to the widely popularized belief, Kashmiri Pandits, like any other community, are a heterogenous community. The fact that they are spread throughout the country calls for a deeper scholarly scrutiny of the assumptions of homogenization. By identifying different factions, the study highlights that such groups have varied and often competing interests, political dispositions and demands. Each group within the community employs tools like essentialization and politics of authenticity to establish their claims of being more 'original' than the rest. This process is marked by ingroup homogenization and outgroup distancing that are mostly created artificially as identity management strategies by each group. While I capture the cleavages within the Pandit community to challenge assumptions of homogeneity, I also highlight cases of daily exchanges between these groups to stress that they are not entirely separate categories. In fact, they are often linked to each other through family ties. The factions therefore are not competing identities as they are often presented but can be better understood as fractured subjectivities within the Kashmiri Pandit identity. Apart from highlighting multiplicity of experiences within the Pandit community, this also contributes to larger debates on a fluid understanding of identity politics by stressing that there exist multiple ways to retain authenticity of one's identity. Also, factors like territoriality continue to remain central in identity assertions of communities that have supposedly lost their geographical confinement to the process of migration.

I explore the abovementioned themes further through the prism of discourse. Building on Foucault's work, I see discourse as a dialectic exchange between the larger system or a phenomenon and the individual actor. The findings suggest that both retain power to influence each other. While the discourse may seek to override individual autonomy to decide on issues of migration, degree of resettlement and choice of return of the migrant; I argue that the individual actor in his interaction with the discourse is not a passive recipient. The relationship, though of unequal dependence, can be manipulated to the benefit of the individual. Discourse in that sense is not as an overarching alien force untouched and beyond the influence of an individual, rather the two are reproduced in a relational power dynamic. Discourse can be manipulated to produce and maintain precarity and victimhood which can act as mobilizing forces for political incentives. It is also important to highlight that there exist multiple

discourses. Every faction of the Pandit community engages in creating its own discourse, at time to disregard that of the other. In this case, dispersed community with factions that engage in competitive victimization, problematize precarity to manufacture agency in varying degrees and forms. While they might not always be in a position to display active decision making, they might borrow power from and appropriate the dominant discourse to claim benefits. The dominance of the discourse therefore should not be equated with loss of agency of the dispersed agent.